

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release On Receipt (prepared 9/26/75)

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RULE CHANGE HELPS ZOOS, CIRCUSES; ALLIGATOR RECLASSIFIED IN SOME AREAS

Major changes in Federal regulations under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, including the removal of the American alligator from endangered status in three southwest Louisiana parishes, were announced today by Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The new rulings, published recently in the Federal Register, help zoos, circuses, and other breeders of endangered species who were previously prevented from freely trading or transporting their surplus animals by establishing a new concept for the conservation of endangered and threatened wildlife: "captive, self-sustaining populations." Under this provision, captive, self-sustaining populations of a species in the United States, which no longer constitute a drain on wild populations, may be reclassified as threatened (not in imminent danger of extinction) even though the species is endangered in the wild. Special permits could then be obtained under simplified application and review procedures for such activities as sales or shipments in interstate commerce that would otherwise be prohibited by the Act.

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At the present time, no animals are designated as captive, self-sustaining populations. These new rules merely establish the framework for this concept; future regulations will be required to actually name specific populations of specific species as "captive, self-sustaining." The Service plans to propose the first of these rulemakings in the very near future.

The regulations retain the alligator in the endangered category in all of its range except Cameron, Vermillion, and Calcasieu Parishes (counties) in Louisiana. While wild alligators in those three parishes are neither endangered nor threatened in the biological sense, they will still be considered to be a threatened species because it is extremely difficult to distinguish them from endangered populations in surrounding areas. The regulations also set criteria for the "similarity of appearance" provision of the Endangered Species Act and establish procedures for dealing with look-alike species.

Outside the three Louisiana parishes--wherever alligators are endangered in the wild--captive populations will also be considered to be threatened under the final rules. Permits will be available for the sale and shipment of animals from these captive populations.

The Service had originally proposed on July 8 to remove alligators in the three Louisiana parishes from endangered status and allow the taking and marketing of these animals under strict Federal and State controls. Alligators in the remainder of Louisiana, and in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas were to be reclassified as threatened. This latter proposed reclassification has been withheld under the final rules pending outcome of additional studies of the distribution and density of alligator populations outside the three Louisiana parishes, especially in coastal areas of the Southeast.

In the three Louisiana parishes where the alligator is no longer considered to be endangered, the revised rules allow the reptile to be hunted in accordance with Louisiana regulations recently established to control the taking and tagging of non-endangered alligators. These regulations provide for an alligator hunting season approved and controlled by the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission.

The marketing of all alligator hides taken during this hunt will be strictly controlled under a Federal licensing and marking system established by the new rules. Such hides may be sold, or offered for sale, only to federally licensed buyers and tanners. Imports and exports of alligator hides will remain prohibited. This system will ensure that alligators taken from other areas are not placed in interstate or foreign commerce.

The new rules also recognize that control of "nuisance" alligators is necessary. Federal and State conservation officials are authorized to kill or remove threatened alligators that prove dangerous to human life, and to salvage and remove sick, injured, orphaned or dead specimens.

In addition, the final rules allow the general public to take alligators in self-defense or in defense of the lives of others. The new regulations establish a reporting system to ensure that this provision is not abused. While some alligators in certain areas could be dangerous to human life, the Service believes most should not pose a serious threat.

Other major changes in Federal endangered species regulations established by the revised rules include provisions governing the exemption from the Act's restrictions for endangered or threatened wildlife held in captivity or a controlled environment at the time the law went into effect, a completely new format for compiling lists of endangered and threatened species, clarification of the endangered species permit procedures, and further explanation of the various prohibitions established by the Act.

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